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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyze feedback given by students of a communication theory class, which uses an integrated approach to help students learn the concepts of communication theory. This analysis seeks to determine how this integrated approach helps students understand communication theory, if at all it does help them. The paper draws upon the scholarship of teaching and learning to analyze the emergent situation in the classroom. The students make active use of Blackboard--and e-learning tool to facilitate interaction among themselves as well as the instructors. The paper focuses on the impact of such technologies to supplement pedagogical techniques in making them more constructive and effective. (Contains 11 references.) (Author)

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Elearning translates to experiential learning In a Communication theory class

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> What you have discovered is receipt for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without reality; they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant (Plato, 1973).

It is not of much use to see literacy as just reading and writing, ignoring the advanced demands that modern, industrial cultures have routinely placed on students in terms of these skills. It is not realistic to expect that merely by "reading" (one sided-engagement) of the text, students should be able to understand something of which they have little or no prior knowledge, or that all people and not just a privileged few, should be able to create texts that others may find useful and appealing. In a certain way, the heart of this issue lies the complexity of the connection between literacy and technology (Tuman, 1996). To understand this connection we must examine some of the common pedagogical practices and try to develop an understanding and see what is a viable and effective approach in the fast paced techno-industrial society of today.

The traditional model of pedagogy has its roots in linearity. This probably came about in the literate world because of the reproduction of language, as a means of instruction, in the form of a book. The advent of the printing press was a major step in this direction. As literacy changed, from its original oral to the written form in pedagogical practices, linearity became an important asset for the reproduction and creation of knowledge. This model of pedagogy is what we commonly use in the classroom today and is called Instructionism. Linearity over the years became a standard method of teaching as well as the construction of knowledge. This model therefore gave rise to the belief that knowledge could be transmitted through a linear method of instruction and is most common model today.

On the other hand, the constructionist approach to learning has its roots in the constructivist pedagogy, which claims that knowledge cannot be transmitted to a learner; rather the learner needs to construct knowledge by her/his own. The constructionist approach stresses the physical construction of artifacts by learners as a crucial method for them to be able to construct knowledge in their minds. This approach implies that the task of learning largely be left in the hands of the learner. She/he is free to structure knowledge as they maybe inclined to, even if it is in the wrong direction. This particular situation has significance from the point of view of creation of knowledge and understanding of theoretical concepts, in particular, concepts related to communication theory.

One method of instruction, therefore, could use the instructionist approach to teach these concepts, which are often described as difficult and abstract by undergraduate students. The other method could use the other, constructionist approach, to teach these concepts to these students. However, in the absence of feedback, students could likely construct a different

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meaning of theory(ies). To overcome the shortcomings of both pedagogical approaches, an integrated approach to teaching communication theory may prove to be more useful. The purpose of this paper is to analyze feedback given by students of a communication theory class, which uses an integrated approach to help students learn the concepts of communication theory. This analysis will seek to determine how this integrated approach helps students understand communication theory, if at all it does help them.

Before beginning the analysis, it is necessary to describe the pattern of teaching that is followed. The class clearly consists of two parts, the first part being the instructionist part. In this part of the class, the students learn about communication theory by reading about it in a prescribed book as well as scholarly articles. The students are also tutored through lecture/exercises. In addition to this, in order to mark the progress of the student as well as to ensure that they are keeping up with the text a short quiz is given to them at the beginning of each session. These quizzes as well as the exercises serve the function of feedback to the students in the class. Feedback is associated with linear instruction (Instructionism), which typically has the following sequence: students are presented with information, followed by a question. After providing an answer, a feedback is presented to the students. The continuation of the learning path is determined by structured interaction. In the second part of the class, the constructionist part: the part where students learn how to represent theory using hypertext. Hypertext, by the original definition, is the opposite of the traditional linear text. Hypertext can be browsed in a non-linear way, that is, it does not require the user to follow by the default sequence of words, sentences, paragraphs, and so forth. Historically, designers of hypertext for educational purposes have used the notion of non-linear text not only with regard to textual and other media delivered in their program, but also the structure of the instructions embedded within the program(s) (Spoehr, 1994). This allows learners to freely navigate throughout the various resources of the program, according to curiosity, associations, or any other motives they might have. However, in the structure of this class the learners were not given a hypertext program to browse through instead it took it one step further by making the students develop their own hypertext, in the form of web pages for the World Wide Web, to represent the communication theories they had learnt.

The objective of this part of the course was to let the students construct their own hypertext pages as per their thought processes. The students were free to use any format for the development of an argument for explaining the concepts according to a theory of their choice. This did not mean that the students were left to their own devices to develop their hypertext pages and the links to other pages. They were tutored by a group of peers who had already taken the course, as well as the instructors. The objective of this tutoring was not to focus their thoughts in a linear structure but rather to focus on helping the students developing their hypertext so that it did not miss out any of the finer nuances of the theory that they were working with. This tutoring, by the peers and the instructors, serves the function of feedback as in the instructionist model. It becomes relevant to integrate it in the constructionist model so that the paths the students followed, in setting up their hypertext pages, lead to the important places and they did not miss out on relevant information and/or contradictory information, which could confuse them. This process is meaningful since the student is actively engaged in thinking about the topics in the theory that they were working with. In the absence of feedback, misconceptions could occur in the students minds about their construction, if for example, it turned out to be inaccurate or irrelevant (Phillips, 1995).

This feedback mechanism serves as a connecting link between the two pedagogical approaches. However, the type of feedback differs according to the approach. While feedback in the instructionist mode serves a corrective function – it is an indicator to the student to fill a gap, which may exist. On the other hand, feedback in the constructionist approach is contingent on content more than on learning objectives. This shift of focus helps shift the students' attention to content of the hypertext pages thereby encouraging them to construct their own version of knowledge – the theory that they are working with. Feedback, in this way occurs at each step of the learning process. This enables the students to move from the instructionist mode to a constructionist or hypertext mode when feedback fades out. It works in the other direction too -- feedback appears, giving the students an opportunity to move back into an instructionist mode when required. The students also make use of an Elearning software package called Blackboard to exchange notes, HTML codes, set schedules, and coordinate the presentation of hypertext, within their group(s).

Teaching the students to use hypertext in formulating their own learning, in one context, involves the use of computers and broadly speaking technology. Hypertext is created using HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language)for creating pages for the World Wide Web. The use of technology in society has its critics and supporters. The supporters of technology have been at the forefront of introduction of computers in the classroom. Whereas, the critics have constantly been at loggerheads with this approach. The most notable being the Unabomber who modeled his critique of technology, given in his manifesto, based on the work of Jaques Ellul. However, the Unabomber manifesto uses the word "computer" frequently in connection with "control" and "technology." Nevertheless, the objectives of this mode of instruction are a step towards reducing the instructors control over the construction of knowledge by learners. By using technology in a productive fashion a synthesis of two approaches encourages the student to test her/his creativity in organizing knowledge, as they feel fit. Therefore, the critique of technology as set forth by Ellul is not relevant in this case. Ellul envisioned widespread social destruction by the use of technology but, he based his observations on the existing state of technology in the 1960's and then extrapolated its linear trend, not accounting for social evolution or economic growth and prosperity. Ellul could not envision the redistribution of technological power, allowing individuals to publish content on an equal footing with large organizations (1964). The use of hypertext is empowering for the students in the classroom as it enables them to find a new voice and encourages them on a road to independent learning.

Another objective of this class concept is to encourage the students to write their own conception of communication theory. This is done to encourage students to be involved in the text and write to learn. This follows from the movement of writing across curriculum (WAC). Traditionally there is little time devoted to writing by the student because this was reserved for a language class. Writing across the curriculum believes that writing should not be its own subject; rather writing is a way for students to understand all subjects (Hill, 1992). This phenomenon of writing as mode of learning can be traced to two closely related movements in American education: the process-over-product movement and the reemergence of cross-curricular writing programs. The rise of new rhetorical scholars in the 1960's the process movement gained momentum. This led to a fusion of rhetoric with psychological and linguistic theories of creativity, composing, and problem solving. Many of the "new rhetoricians" were interdisciplinary, merging linguistics, philosophy, literary theory, communication theory, and cognitive psychology with rhetorical theory and writing instruction. This made possible the link between scholarship and process-over-product approaches. Using this linking approach, we

encourage students to write their own conception of theory. Thus, writing and learning becomes a different project when the objective is to promote the understanding of the discipline. The high number of published accounts of successful classroom practices based on a writing as a mode of learning suggests that such practices offer the potential to transform the classroom environments (Ackerman, 1993). This methodology in actuality stimulates the thought-expression dialectic and encourages the student to construct a balanced view of knowledge of the discipline. It encourages them into self-expression through writing and leads them sequentially and by self-indexing into the public world of formal discourse.

One of the objectives of the course is to promote independent and experiential learning, thereby constructivism, amongst the students and move them away from the standard pedagogical mode of Instructionism. To know more about this the students are encouraged to write a self-assessment report for extra credit. Analyzing these reports reveals a considerable thought that goes into writing them. One student for instance said:

> "I have seen that I have been able to understand these complex (communication) theories, design a web page, talk about them with others outside of class; I have been able to do all of this on my own. If you had asked me if I would have been able to do this at the beginning of the quarter, my answer would have been a simple "NO!". I am pleased with my growth as an independent student, and I plan to take what I have learned and apply it to everything I do in life."

There are other criticisms of the use of technology. There is a feeling that the much-touted literary revival is a myth. People who used to talk to each other, even on the phone, now use e-mail. What really gets churned out on e-mails and web-groups is second-rate literary stuff (Stoll, 1995). Nevertheless, e-mail has been found to increase interactivity in discussions amongst students. In terms of successful learning, these students need a tutor's guidance but this guidance should treat them as mature people (Marttunen, 1998). In the design of this course structure, the students were given guidance at the multi-levels, from their peers, as well as from the instructors. This multi-level mentoring has its rewards in helping the students develop into independent thinkers while being team players. One student's comments read:

> "I believe that my independence has really blossomed. During the first three web-pages, I almost always ended up calling another member of my group or our tutor in a state of panic about what I had done wrong. I can now gladly say that I did the last two pages completely on my own, and what an amazing feeling that is! Along with independent learning, I have realized how to be an independent worker while working within a group."

The unfortunate part is that pedagogical practices that use technology for, or to assist instruction, do not attempt to use the possibilities of the technology to the full. They could be more effective and economical using standard print. A lot of them are a mixture of linearity and explorations, not very different from practices that existed in the print form about twenty years ago. They fall short of the desired expectations because they do not follow some basic principles of educational programs: (1) Active participation, by learners, in the learning process; (2) Immediate knowledge of results and corrective feedback; (3) Avoidance of excessive errors on the part of the learners (Romiszowksi, 1988).

In the experience of conducting this class, which makes a strong attempt to integrate, both Instructionistic and Constructionistic principles, the results are quite encouraging based on some of the comments that we have seen earlier. The boost in the self-confidence of the students, as stated in their self-assessments is a strong indicator of this. However, it is necessary

to point out that these assessments were done by the students for an extra credit so they could be affects by the bias of getting a higher score. Although, some of them are quite candid in expressing their remarks, which reveal their frustration at not being able to sort out some glitches in the technology which is being used:

> "Words can't even describe the level of stress that I have right now because of this stupid fetch program. Because it is not directly linked to the oak (the Web Server for the university) system, it takes forever to get anything from my public file. I understand that is an educational experience you want all to participate on, but let me tell you, this not an option for Mac people (Macintosh users) if they do not have dial-net."

Since then every effort has been made to make these technical problems not interfere with the learning. In reality, however, these kinds of problems are a little window to the professional challenges that the students may face once they leave the university and pursue their careers. It is a kind of preparation for them not to expect that all things would work smoothly at all times. On the other hand, however, this kind of a pedagogical practice makes the student dependent on technology to a large extent. The teacher at this stage appears to be more of a technician. What the student wants at this stage the teacher may not be able to provide. This is the kind of criticism that is being pointed towards technology in the classroom. Education, as Talbott (1995) interprets Papert, needs to be integrated with life, put fun into exploration, learning, and the value placed on abstract reasoning is a major obstacle to progress in education. Although these comments are based on the issues faced by educators today, they are however relevant to this study. The students do start being dependent on the willingness of the computer to place its mimicking intelligence at their service and sometimes may diminish their intelligent capacity to cope.

Through the integration of Constructionist practices with standard Instructionist pedagogy using technology, a very strong attempt has been made to help forge a different and quite distinctive pedagogical strategy to overcome some of the issues that limit both methods, Instructionism and Constructionism, individually. The results of this strategy are quite encouraging and constant effort is made to enrich the creation, exploration, and learning of knowledge of communication theory.

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